

Introduction

I saw an anonymous troll on social media recently who pleaded with people to “Skip church and read your Bible”. Jesus said he would build his church, not his list of Bible readers, however. As many have observed, Jesus said he would build his church, not his non-profit, not his parachurch organization, not his social services ministry. These things are good things, but the only thing Jesus said he would build is his church, his assembly of those who gather in his name, who worship him who is worthy.

What makes the church so different, so important, so special? Clearly this internet random is missing something profound, but what, exactly, is he missing? It’s easy to lose sight of the centrality of the local church in following Christ and participating in his mission. We see this drift in the language we often use. We speak of “going to church” or we ask “which church do you *attend*”—as if we’re asking a question similar to “Which Meijer do you use?” or “What’s your favorite restaurant?”. The church of Jesus Christ, however, is not like these things. It is radically different.

Today is Pentecost, the day on which the church was born. Like Christmas and Easter and the seasons of Advent and Lent, very early in history churches began to celebrate the Lord on this day in celebration of his work in building his church. Today my aim is to instill in you and me a greater love for the church and even more, a greater recognition of the profound gift that Pentecost is to God’s people. We find ourselves in Revelation 5 this morning.

Rev 5:1 Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴ and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵ And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe

and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Revelation 5:1–14

The Scroll

Revelation is a genre of literature that utilizes symbolism. Apocalyptic is a style of writing that was popular among Jews and Christians for about 400 years. Many of the symbols were widely recognized in John’s day, even if they are truly strange to us. The word “apocalypse” means an unveiling, an uncovering—a revelation.

What is being revealed? In popular imagination Revelation is about the future, about end times. It certainly *addresses* the very last days when the Lord returns, but is it *about* the end times? How does John begin his unveiling, his *revelation*? He begins with these words: “The revelation of Jesus Christ”. God is revealing the Lord Jesus to the apostle John, and therefore to us. As we look at our text this morning, this is what we should see: the Lord Jesus.

It begins with a scroll, or rather, with one seated on a throne holding a scroll. The one seated is, of course, God himself. He has a scroll and John points out it is written on both sides. This is unusual. Scrolls were often made of papyrus by laying the papyrus fibers perpendicular to one another. The ordinary thing to do was to write on the side in which the fibers were horizontal. It was smoother and easier to write on. John points out the scroll has writing on both sides.

He’s indicating the writing is extensive. It’s so extensive it was written on both sides, for writing material was expensive. Yes, God is the one holding the scroll, but this is apocalyptic imagery. God is not being frugal here; John is making a point. Everyone reading this would have understood the writer wouldn’t simply start a new sheet without first writing on the back.

So what is this extensive writing? Again, this book is an apocalypse, an unveiling. The idea of written words revealing something would have been an image in the cognitive environment of John’s readers. The book of Enoch was very popular in the first century and it’s likely John’s readers would have been familiar with it. It is also apocalyptic.

In 1 Enoch he is told to read some “heavenly tablets”. These tablets were covered in writing and he was told that every detail of every person’s life were written on them. All of human history was contained on them. This is what John is seeing as well, though from a different perspective. He, too, sees the writing in heaven, only the focus of the scroll is not simply human history but God’s plans for human history. His readers were also familiar

with similar imagery in Scripture. Here's an example from the Psalms and another from a couple prophets.

Ps 139:16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

Psalm 139:16

Isaiah writes,

Is 29:11 And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed."

Isaiah 29:11

Daniel writes,

Dan 8:26 The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true, but seal up the vision, for it refers to many days from now."

Daniel 8:26

In these cases the vision is sealed up and cannot be shared. The words are unavailable. Both Isaiah and Daniel saw things but could not reveal them fully for the revelations were sealed. Notice verse 1 says this scroll is also sealed—and this time it has *seven* seals. In apocalyptic imagery the number seven is the sign of fullness or completeness or totality. Seven days makes a complete week. We see lots of sevens in the book of Revelation and this is not an accident. Interestingly, in John's Gospel there are seven signs pointing to Jesus, with the seventh being his resurrection!

This scroll contains God's plans for the world, and it's sealed with seven seals. It is totally and completely sealed. Strings would be tied around the scroll and down through the middle of it and tied. The knots would have wax poured onto them and pressed with a seal. This indicates the scroll has not been opened—and cannot be opened except by an authorized person.

While God sits on his throne holding a scroll with his detailed plans for the world an angel cries out, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? ". Who can *bring about* God's plans for the world? The obvious question is why doesn't God do it? He's sitting on the throne. They're his plans. He can break the seals and open the scroll. The problem is a human must fulfill God's purposes for the world. He placed Adam and Eve in the world to bring about his purposes and they failed. Adam rebelled against God. A human must fulfill God's purposes.

John understands this and in verse 3 we read there was no one *anywhere* who was qualified to open the scroll or even look in it. Like Adam, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. John says he began to "weep loudly"—he began to wail and to sob. John recognizes that if God has plans for the world those plans are ultimately good plans. The seals prevent this plan from being enacted, so one who is able to open the scroll and break its seals must

be found—but one is not found and John weeps. No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was found to be worthy to open the scroll.

Then some time later one of the twenty-four elders speaks to John. These are the elders who are seated on thrones around God’s throne, some sort of creatures who reign with him in some way. One of them tells John to stop weeping because the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered. He—a human!—can open the scroll and break its seals.

This is why the Son of God took on the form of a human. He came to do what the first Adam would not. He would remain faithful, being truly human in all that it means to be human. We’re so used to humans being selfish and sinful and proud, etc., that we think those things are part of what it *means* to be human. They’re not. Those things are actually an aberration of what it means to be human. Jesus was the first true Man, for he lived in full and complete submission to his Father. For this reason, the elder says, he can open the scroll and break the seals and do what Adam would not.

A Slaughtered Lamb

In Revelation John uses an interesting technique. He hears something but what he sees is something both unexpected and far greater than what he heard. For example, in chapter 7 he hears the number of those sealed for God and it’s a big number: 144,000. What he sees, however, is far, far greater than 144,000 and more fully explains what he heard.

Rev 7:9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

Revelation 7:0

John hears symbolic numbers but the reality is far greater than what the symbolic numbers can convey. He hears of judgments but when he sees them they are far, far greater. In our text he hears of the one who is worthy to open the scroll. That one is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, and this Lion has *conquered*. That is, he has defeated his enemies. There are none who can stand against him. John hears about this conquering Lion, but what does he *see*, knowing that what he sees is far greater than what he hears and offers a fuller explanation of what he hears. What he hears is really, really great! Remember what John saw in verse 6: “I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain”.

John hears of a Lion who has conquered, but what he sees is a Lamb who has been slain. A lion conquers by killing, by inflicting death. A Lamb conquers by *dying*, by experiencing death. John begins to see God’s plans for the world and his plans include becoming one of us, one who was of the tribe of Judah and was the offspring of David therefore the rightful King to rule over God’s people. This Lion of the Tribe of Judah has conquered, by not by power or by might. This Lion is a Lamb that was slain, and in his death he conquers.

God’s plans for the world include the Lord Jesus coming as a human, but not to inflict vengeance and wrath. This conquering Lion came to experience judgment on behalf of his people. John is saying that this, the death of Jesus, is a fuller, more complete understanding of his victory. He adds by saying this slaughtered Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes.

Again, seven is the number of completeness, of totality. A horn is a symbol of power. This slaughtered Lamb has all power. Infinite power. Unlimited power. This power is seen most clearly in his death. Further, he has seven eyes. Eyes symbolize knowledge and understanding. This Lamb has seven eyes, the full number of eyes. Nothing is hidden from him. He is all knowing and all seeing. Nothing is beyond his gaze.

In this part of the vision we see the incarnation of the Son of God, along with his death and resurrection. His victory is total, and it came about through his death. His faithfulness unto death is what Adam would not do in the garden. To bring about the fullness of God's plans God had to become a human and do what humans would not. We also see his ascension, for this slaughtered Lamb who is victorious over death is now exalted and has received the name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We see his incarnation. We see his death and resurrection. We see his ascension. What comes next? Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit. We see this in our text as well. John sees a slaughtered Lamb standing there, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are, he says, "the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth". The seven what, now?

There is one Holy Spirit. The third Person of the Trinity is one, not seven. What are the seven spirits of God? This is the Holy Spirit expressed in apocalyptic imagery. Seven is the number of completeness, of totality. Prior to the ascension of Christ, the Spirit of God would come upon people for a time. The promise of the new covenant is that God would put his Spirit *in* his people. The sign of the new covenant is the presence and activity of the Spirit of God.

When John sees the exalted Christ standing in heaven, he also sees the Spirit of God sent into the world *in his fullness*. No longer does the Spirit merely come upon God's people from time to time. Now the Spirit dwells among God's people. This is what Paul was getting at in 1 Corinthians 2 when he told that church they are God's temple where God's Spirit dwells. Using seven with regard to the singular Holy Spirit emphasizes the Spirit's presence and activity among God's people.

At this point in John's vision Jesus, the conquering Lion and the slaughtered Lamb, now high and lifted up, exalted to the highest place, steps forward to receive the scroll from his Father's hand. Notice the response in verse 8: the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before him, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense. These are symbols of worship. The incense in particular John says represents the prayers of the saints, of God's people.

They sing a new song: "Worthy are you take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and every language and people and nation". On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was sent by the Lord Jesus to dwell among his people and to empower them to live for his glory. As the apostles proclaimed the gospel all those in Jerusalem—from all over the world—heard the gospel in their own languages. And so the church was born.

The Right Response

Notice in verse 10 the change in tenses. Their song declares the slaughtered Lamb who reigns made those very people from every tribe and language and people and nation into a kingdom

and priests to God. This is the priesthood of all believers. Each one of us here is a priest to God! He has made—past tense. It is an established fact. The Lamb did this. This has already happened.

Then the song declares “and they *shall* reign on the earth”—that’s future tense. They are, right now, a kingdom and priests to God, but they do not yet reign on the earth. That is coming! On the day the Lord Jesus returns the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven and he raises the dead and his people will be on the new earth with him forever, reigning over the world with the risen Christ, doing what Adam refused to do in the beginning.

The victory of the Lamb is so complete and total it cannot but take over the world. He did not come to raise an army; he came to raise the dead, beginning with himself. The Lamb had to first conquer death, then the Spirit of God goes about the world building the church of Jesus Christ, saving all those ransomed from every tribe and language and people and nation. It isn’t as though his victory won’t come until he returns. His victory comes about every time a person repents and believes and is baptized. The church of Christ grows, signifying the extent of his victory. The fullness of his victory comes when the Lord Jesus returns to this world and establishes his eternal kingdom.

Again, see the response. The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders are some sort of created beings that are always in God’s presence. The elders in particular are important for they are seated on thrones—lesser thrones, but thrones nonetheless. There is only throne at the right hand of God, however, and the Lion of the tribe of Judah sits on it. Notice the other voices that join in: “the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands”. That’s an ancient way to say “bajillions and bajillions”.

They sing together, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and glory and blessing!” The Lamb is worthy of worship! One of my favorite things about this church is how loudly we sing. Sometimes I stop singing—you’re welcome—so I can hear the whole church singing together. Can you imagine being part of this choir? All of God’s people from all of human history joining in with this angelic choir made up of bajillions and bajillions of voices?

This is how great the Lord is. This is how worthy he is. This is the real reason we want this church to grow numerically. It isn’t about being a bigger church and it isn’t about having a bigger budget. It isn’t even about having a greater impact in our community. The reason we pray for this church to grow is simple and straightforward: the Lord Jesus is worthy of *more* worshipers singing his praises together. This is one reason I love our Tenebrae service. This auditorium is filled with people who worship together. Jesus is worthy of more worshipers!

The time is coming when his church will be built, fully and completely, when all those ransomed for God by the Lamb will confess together that he is Lord and will gladly and willingly bow the knee to him and worship him. Jesus declared he would build his church and when the church is fully and completely “built”, the right response is in verse 13: “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them” will shout in unison, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever”. The four living creatures will shout, “Amen” and the twenty-four elders will bow down and worship God in Trinity.

This is what Daniel saw in a vision though at the time the vision was sealed. Here the vision is unsealed for us.

Dan 7:13 I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13–14

One “like a son of man” was presented before the Ancient of Days. This person was long understood to be divine. This is why Jesus’ favorite title for himself was “Son of Man”, not “Son of God”. He was declaring that he is the one “like a son of man”—so like an ordinary human being that he is, in fact, a human being! He is also God in every way. This is what Daniel could neither comprehend fully nor reveal. “He appears to be...human, I think...but...he’s also God? How?” Daniel also records the outcome of the Son of Man receiving a kingdom and an everlasting dominion.

Dan 7:27 And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.’

Daniel 7:27

The Lord has already made them a kingdom and priests to God. One day he will cause them to reign over the earth as his people. That day is coming. The right response to this truth is worship. It is to praise the Lord with our words and with our actions. It is to demonstrate our love for him and our gratitude to him.

The Spirit

What brings about this right response is the work of the Holy Spirit. Under the old covenant given to God’s people at Mount Sinai the Spirit was not given in the same way. The Spirit was present among the people of Israel, but the Spirit’s presence was temporary and for specific tasks and purposes.

For example, when the tabernacle was being built, along with all its furnishings, the Spirit came upon Bezalel and Oholiab in Exodus 31. This was temporary. In Judges the Spirit would come upon a judge and empower the judge to deliver Israel. This was temporary. The Spirit would empower the kings from time to time. Both Saul and David were empowered to deliver Israel as king. The Spirit’s presence was not a permanent, indwelling presence, however.

The covenant allowed for God to dwell among his people. The central purpose of the exodus was not the land of Canaan, but the tabernacle. God would dwell among his people. Because God is holy and his people were not holy, his presence was confined largely to the tabernacle. There was limited access. This was not God’s ultimate plan. While at Mount Sinai God made a promise.

Ex 19:5 “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

Exodus 19:5–6

God wanted all of his people to be a kingdom and priests to God! They did not become a kingdom and priests to God. Though God had given them a profound and gracious covenant, and they experienced the presence of God among them in a way no other nation on earth had ever experienced, God remained at a distance, for they were not a holy people.

By the time the prophets came around God promised a new covenant for his people, one that would be different from the former covenant in a significant way: they broke the covenant at Mount Sinai but the new covenant cannot be broken. This is because the new covenant will be based on the righteousness of a single individual, a prophet like Moses—one like a son of man, as Daniel saw in his vision, one who would do what the first Adam would not.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God promised this new covenant would be internal, a law written on the hearts of his people. It would be an inner transformation so profound they would keep the covenant. Through the prophet Ezekiel God explained how he would bring about this writing of the law on the heart: he would put his Spirit in his people and the Spirit would cause them to obey. Through the prophet Joel God said the Spirit would be poured out on all his people, men, women, older, younger. All who would be members of this new covenant people would know the Lord and would be transformed by the presence and activity—the permanent indwelling—of the Holy Spirit.

When the churches in Galatia were tempted to embrace the law of Moses as a way of life in order to gain “more” of God, Paul pointed them to the reality of their experience. They already had the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit among them; what more could they ask for? God was actively fulfilling the new covenant in their midst. To attempt to replace the Spirit with their own works of the law would be to repudiate the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

This is why his language in that letter was so strong! He told them that even if he, the apostle Paul, or even an angel were to preach a “gospel” contrary to the one Paul had already proclaimed, then let he or the angel or whomever be accursed. To say that in a more crass way, if anyone would proclaim a different gospel than the one he already preached, that person can *go to hell*.

The problem is we are all tempted to replace the Spirit’s work in our life with our own work, because it’s much easier to measure our own work than it is the Spirit’s work. How do you measure whether you are becoming more gentle or patient or kind or faithful or loving or peaceful? These are the fruit of the Spirit. You can’t measure these things, so we tend to substitute them. I read my Bible this morning. I spent this amount of time praying. I gave this amount of money. Wowee, look at me! I can *measure* those things!

This happens on a church level as well. It is easy to begin replacing the fruit of the Spirit with measurable, earthly things. How many baptisms did we have last year? How many are participating in Bible study? What’s our average attendance? How many ladies were at the ladies’ retreat? Legalism, in whatever form it comes, becomes a replacement for the Spirit

of God. We see this in church history.

Before Constantine legalized and began favoring Christianity, churches insisted on individual, personal holiness. If you say you're a follower of Jesus, then prove it. Live it. Don't tell me you're a follower of Jesus—*show* me you're a follower of Jesus. The central promise of the new covenant is the Holy Spirit. If you are in Christ then we should see evidence of the Spirit's presence and activity in your life. Notice in our text that immediately after seeing the victorious Lion as a slaughtered Lamb, John sees "the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth". This is the promise of the new covenant!

Again, think back to Constantine's day. When it suddenly became fashionable to be a Christian, people began entering the church in droves. How could they ensure each person was actually being transformed by the Spirit? This is necessarily a slow and inefficient process, as it comes through the context of relationship. Ain't nobody got time for relationships, though, so the emphasis began to move away from *personal* holiness to *corporate* holiness.

This corresponds with the increase in liturgical emphasis. Rather than being a group of faithful followers of Jesus worshiping together with one voice, the experience of the gathered assembly became more institutional. The emperor even was given a special throne for during the service. Suddenly the church wasn't singing, but professional singers were singing. The form and the structure of the service became more important. Those leading the service began to be called priests rather than elders.

Suddenly the experience of the Spirit's presence and activity was reduced to the worship event with increasing pomp and formality added. Worship became a program rather than a way of life. In this way the emphasis no longer had to be on personal piety for it was much simpler to control the corporate piety by ensuring the worship event was done properly.

Legalism began to replace the Spirit of God. The kingdom of priests was transferred to a few and the Spirit's "presence" was experienced primarily in the liturgical event. Today it doesn't have to be a high liturgy that replaces the Spirit. It can simply be an emphasis on the right instruments or hymns or the psalter. An emphasis on voting a certain way can become the new metric for measuring "righteousness", with no regard for whether you are loving or patient or kind—you know, the things *the Spirit brings about*. As that great musical theologian Bono once said, "Religion is what happens when the Spirit has left the building".

Application

The temptation that all churches face is the temptation to become more like the YMCA and less like a true church. A true church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the place God dwells on earth. In a church people look for the evidence of the Spirit in a person's life. That's hard to measure and evaluate. It takes time. We are an impatient people, however, so we look for shortcuts.

A YMCA offers classes. How does the Y measure its effectiveness? They don't measure it by how healthy people are becoming. How could they measure this? They measure it by attendance. How many members are paying each month? How full are the various classes they offer? What classes should they offer in order to attract more people? Whether they invest more in the weight room or on exercise equipment isn't evaluated on the basis of people

needing more strength or more cardio endurance; that investment is based on whether more people use weights or more people are on machines.

People who frequent the YMCA can get stronger and more fit. They can get healthier. What does not happen, however, what cannot happen, is they do not become more like Jesus. This is the work of God in Christ *through his Spirit*. The Spirit was given to the church on the day of Pentecost in fulfillment of God's promises of transformation.

This transformation comes only by the Spirit of God. The Spirit dwells in his churches. This is what sets a local church apart from all other organizations. Only the church is built by Jesus. Only the church can promise the presence and activity of the Spirit of God in its midst.

How do we see the evidence of the Spirit at work in a church? It's quite simple. A church that worships the Lord Jesus is an assembly of Christ where the Spirit is at work. When John has a vision of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, followed by the coming of the Spirit, the immediate outcome is worship. A church that pursues entertainment or distraction does not demonstrate the same response John sees. The Spirit glorifies the Lord Jesus. Jesus said in John 16 when he promised to send the Spirit, "He will glorify me" (John 16:14).

If we are led by and filled by the Holy Spirit, we will also glorify the Lord Jesus in our singing, in our words, in our actions. Our lives will demonstrate that we are the people of God. To be the people of God we must be a worshiping people, a people who live to reflect the glory of God in the face of Christ through his indwelling Spirit.